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Matter of Fact By Stewart Alsop

The NSC System

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THE NATIONAL Security Council, the Nation's top policy-making body, was formed for the soundest of reasons and has often performed most usefully. Yet, it is time to ask whether, on balance, the whole governmental system which has grown up around the NSC has not proved a dangerous failure.



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The laudable purpose of the NSC was to provide the Government with a single, coherent policy, instead of half a dozen insanely competing policies. The idea was that the principal policy-making of ficers would meet regularly to hammer out policies on the major issues, for submission to the President.

The idea worked well at first. But as the years have passed, certain unanticipated consequences of the NSC system have become apparent.

In the first place, the council has tended to become an instrument, not for reaching hard decisions, but for reaching the lowest common denominator of indecision. President Eisenhower, as in the matter of Quemoy and Matsu, will occasionally take matters into his own hands and overrule the NSC. But, like President Truman before him, and for understandable reasons, he heartily dislikes "split papers." Thus the NSC system generates a heavy pressure for unanimity at all costs.

UNANIMITY often boils down to gassy generalities—many NSC papers these days are reliably reported to consist of meaningless governmentese, and nothing else at all. And when real decisions cannot be avoided, unanimity is almost always

achieved simply by splitting the difference. Do we, for example, make a major effort to overtake the Soviet lead in missile development, or is it more important to balance the budget? In the NSC, difference is split. The missile effort is stepped up somewhat, but not enough to throw the budget out of whack—or to catch up with the Soviets. This difference splitting is about as useful as building a bridge halfway across a river.

The NSC system has, moreover, seeped relentlessly down through the whole Government. Inter-departmental committee is piled on inter-departmental committee in a vast squirming pyramid, so that decisive action is impossible, and officials at all levels waste their weary lives away at committee meetings, with no time left to think or act. The results were neatly summed up by Dr. Walter Dornberger, creator of the V-2, when asked why American industry had fallen behind in missile development:

"THE INDUSTRY has to convince at least 200 different people in 20 different offices and committees before a new project can start. Most of these people change every two years. They have different opinions and they have to be convinced again. Too many people, too many questions, too many answers."

These consequences of the NSC system are serious enough. But there is another consequence which is very much worse. The system has tended to cut off communication between the American Government and its real masters, the American people. A wall of sacrosanct immunity has been built around the NSC, so that Government officials tremble and turn pale, as though a blasphemy had been committed, when they hear the august unmentionable initials pronounced.

"Policy decisions of the National Security Council," one member of that body has loftily stated, "are not a fit subject for public discussion." This is another way of saying that policy decisions of the American Government are not a fit subject for public discussion. For the NSC is the Government these days.

THE CABINET, already shadowy under Franklin Roosevelt, has become the merest shadow of a shadow, since all real power has passed to the NSC. But when the Cabinet was the principal policy-making body, it never occurred to anyone to suggest that its policy decisions were not fit subject for public discussion. They were discussed freely and heatedly, inside the Government and out, in accord with the traditional American system.

Almost without anybody noticing, the NSC system, of secret decisions secretly arrived at, has been replacing the traditional system. Obviously there is an area of the Government's policy-making process which is properly secret. But the NSC system goes much further than that. It is a system in which the Government's policy on the great central issues is regarded as none of the public's business and, increasingly none of Congress' business either.

Surely the NSC system explains at least in part the queer public apathy which has greeted the many authoritative warnings that the world balance of power is shifting rapidly in favor of the Soviets.

What to do about this sort of challenge to our national security is, according to the NSC system, not a fit subject for public discussion. So the public can hardly be expected to get very excited about it.

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